

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH LIEUTENANT
COLONEL ANDREW POPPAS, COMMANDER, 5TH SQUADRON 73RD
CAVALRY 82ND AIRBORNE

SUBJECT: OPERATION ITHACA VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): So,
Colonel, as we start all over again, your opening statement again, sir.

COL. POPPAS: I think I'd like to open -- first, I look forward to talk with all the
military bloggers, especially with the background that they have and their insight. I think
forward to the dissertation -- discussion that we have.

A little bit about myself just to set this up. I command 5th Squadron 73rd Cav in
the 82nd. We have -- since coming over to Iraq, we've been attached to 3rd Brigade 1st

Cavalry Division. As we came over, we have moved out to the Iranian border area and we're working to stem some of the accelerants coming across and some other problem sets in that area.

In that, though, when we talk about this squadron, it's unique in it's the first airborne reconnaissance squadron. I'm an infantryman by trade; spent most of my time from Company Command Forward at Fort Bragg. And they identified -- I commanded 3rd Battalion 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, and that was a battalion, as they stood it up, General Caldwell obviously wanted to set it up for success, wanted to transition a full battalion into the squadron. In doing so, when you take a look at it, the individual soldiers, we had the latitude to hand-pick our leaders, both officers and NCOs, and most of our soldiers. And additionally, where a lot units now through the rotation, soldiers come in 90 days to 120 days out, they do a train-up and they execute the deployment, we've been together for almost two years. We've become a very strong, cohesive and a very professional unit. We've trained together for a year prior, we deployed together, and we've been fighting together every since. And a lot of the special skills we've had has enabled us to meet the success we've had. Just the competence -- when you take a look at our NCOs, junior officers, the amount of -- and the latitude that we provide them in the execution of missions, it's pretty phenomenal when you see what they've taken on.

And then you look at the battlespace of what we've taken, to include this Operation Ithaca. One troop executed this operation; the battalion PAC went with them. But it was masterfully planned, isolated. They went in -- it was three separate villages in the area that had been identified through engagements with the locals.

We've done a series of operations in this area. All our intel pointed to this area as the safe haven that they've collapsed back into.

And we put together the plan based on that intel and then some of our own that we collected. And by isolating the objective first, then we dominated the battlespace by bringing in all of our forces through a air assault, and then we destroyed the enemy in a very concise subsequent clearance of the objectives.

One of the great portions of it -- one area that they fought extremely strong, in a little hamlet of about three different buildings -- and we found out why. We killed and captured those that were fighting that area. Inside the building there was eight individuals, Iraqis, that had been held hostage and had (obviously ?) just the day prior been sentenced to death by the Islamic State of Iraq. And this was an al Qaeda strong point. And we freed them on the day that they were subject to die.

Some have been -- we also found a video recorder with tapes in that that identified both some of those that had been guards and others that had been killed. And they had murdered others in the same manner. And the pictures we had showed some of these people that were beaten. And we broke that complete ring that they used for extortion and the ability to manipulate the populace. And that really sets the conditions, both from the individual soldier level up to the Operation Ithaca execution.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, Colonel. Excellent work.

David Axe, do you have a question?

Q Yes. Jack, can you hear me?

MR. HOLT: Yes.

Q Okay. Good. It's not me. (Chuckles.)

Sir, can you -- first of all, when did this operation happen?

COL. POPPAS: It happened on Tuesday the 12th. As -- without getting into the specifics, that is an air assault that went in and brought in an overwhelming force, isolation capability, with different units in those areas. And it allowed us to do a subsequent clear without allowing the enemy -- denying the enemy to (exfil off ?) the objective without being engaged.

Q Okay. Can you tell us more about the intelligence work that laid the groundwork for this?

COL. POPPAS: Certainly, and it's something that we've obviously, being -- having been here a year, we've developed. We've got a lot of intelligence-gathering capability within the U.S. military. But what we have found in this area of the Diyala River Valley, with the surge in Baghdad and Baqubah, we'd identified in advance, when you put that large a force into major cities, you'll meet success in clearing those cities. And they have met success, especially in Baqubah, to our south.

But the elements that leave there, whatever insurgent or terrorist elements they are, they've got to go somewhere. And we knew in the Diyala River Valley -- that's why the brigade commander put our unit up in this region -- to deny them the ability to exfil into this area, we'll at least put sensors out there, because it is a large expanse, to identify them. Other sensors are obviously ones of individual soldiers, through patrols and engagements, and then also other sensors that we have in gathering intelligence.

The strength of this was, we'd done a -- we have conducted a series of operations. Some of our other intel had identified elements moving into this general region. When we did a raid on a -- it was a non-kinetic raid or an engagement to the north -- we saw large mass movement into this northernmost village, off -- not of Operation Ithaca objective, but to the north. When we went in there, it was a predominantly Shi'a village.

So we went into that village. We engaged with the mukhtar and the sheikh and then the locals, and we fanned out and just through tactical questioning, we found out that most of them had been forced out of these villages to the south that comprised Operation Ithaca.

As they started talking to us, they drew handwritten maps of where their houses were. Others who had been there longer, as they've tried to move from these villages, they told us areas that they had started to sandbag, areas that they were putting in strong points, where they'd put caches in the local palm groves that they could watch. So we had some very specific intelligence that was provided to us from the local populace.

From that, we confirmed it with other -- obviously such things as the UAVs, so we could look down and confirm or deny some of these, and then also with boots on the ground.

We had a very good picture going in also with some of their -- you know, the times they slept and moved, so we were very specific in this execution of this op as a deliberate attack based on excellent intel.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Andrew Lubin.

Q Yes, Colonel. Thank you for taking the time. This is Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. Can you talk to us, please, about how the Iraqi army is doing? We've heard various reports that they're doing really well and others that they are not, so can you give us your boots on the ground experience?

COL. POPPAS: I can. And if you'll let me, I'll give it to you from two different perspectives. Two major battles that we have -- one in the east -- and I've dealt with many different units; the Iraqi security forces in an operation in Turki village is Turki Bowl One and Two. They actually as a squadron -- obviously, I do not have as many as a full battalion; we call ourselves Task Force 300, because that's literally the fighter force you have going forward. So we work very closely with the Iraqi security forces.

The ones we saw in the east, there is a -- of the 5th Army -- were excellent soldiers. Initially, the operation in January, it had horrendous weather, and we thought every 48 hours we were going to have to rotate out these companies, all right? It's obviously a logistics challenge because it was 30 kilometers away from our base, and it would have caused a lot of trouble any time you have a RIP, a Relief In Place -- is difficult, especially in these conditions.

At the two-day mark, two of the companies, they were -- two of the Kurdish companies for the Iraqi army, and one which was predominantly a Shi'a company -- came forward and said, we don't want to be RIP'd out. We are here for the duration, literally came up and said that to me. They said all we ask for is additional T-shirts, socks and cigarettes. And I'll tell you --

Q Oh, good.

COL. POPPAS: -- I was happy to oblige. And they fought with us the entire 11 days of that operation. And we've seen that in the (DRV ?) also. We work with them -- the units we work with now we work in conjunction with. We don't live on the FOB; we live out in a patrol base, a company-level patrol base, and we have a partnered Iraqi army company. We do all of our patrols combined. When we're back in, we do training together, everything from first aid to reflex of fire to how to do patrols, and then they follow our debriefing format and how they do pre-combat inspections.

My experience with the Iraqi army units that I have fought alongside personally has been excellent. I do know that there are others that are not at the same level of training, but the ones that I have fought with here in the Diyala River Valley and continue to fight with, and the ones that I have fought with out in the east both along the Iranian border and in the Turki village area have been very good.

Q Okay. Thank you.

Q Hey, Colonel. It's Gerry Gilmore with American Forces Press Service. How are you doing? You said the Diyala River Valley -- are these the villages of Haimer, Abu Nasim and Jamil?

COL. POPPAS: Yes.

Q Okay. And you were involved in that? Go ahead. Go ahead.

COL. POPPAS: I'm sorry. I was just going to say, if you look at the map of Baqubah, the Diyala River travels through Baqubah into the northeast, and we work up in the river valley itself to the northeast of Baqubah --

Q Right.

COL. POPPAS: -- both east and west --

Q Okay.

So you were involved, you were the American contingent when you -- 29 al Qaeda gunmen were killed, 23 captured, eight hostages released, right, and two weapons caches found, because they sent out a press release to accompany this.

COL. POPPAS: Yeah, there's actually a third weapons cache, so.

Q Okay. And you were the commander of what unit again, sir?

COL. POPPAS: It is 5th Squadron, 73rd Cavalry Regiment, 82nd Airborne.

Q Gotcha.

COL. POPPAS: And we are currently at -- we attached the 3rd Brigade, 1st Cav., and this is their battlespace that we fight in.

Q Mmm-kay. And part of this was a U.S. helicopter air assault?

COL. POPPAS: It was all by helicopter.

Q Oh, okay. So you -- you choppered in and the troops came off the choppers then, our troops?

COL. POPPAS: Correct.

Q Okay, cool.

COL. POPPAS: We came in on a number of different LZs, and what we do -- we'll change our means of insertion. We'll come in by -- we've walked in before, which surprises everybody because nobody likes to walk in the middle of some with other equipment. We've come in by helicopter at different times day and night, and we'll come in by ground by our humvees. And sometimes we'll use a combination. We use the intel, and the enemy's set to determine the best way to influence the fight.

Q And how did the enemy react? Were they caught off guard, would you say?

COL. POPPAS: They were. They were caught on this operation completely by surprise, both in the timing and the placing of our elements that came in, and again, we -- as an American force, we've got a lot of assets and combat multipliers at our disposal. For this fight we went into multiple LZs, so we knew -- when you look at the map, there are normal lines of drift where you know they're going to go. We had lost them for a while; so we knew where they had gone previously, so we targeted those areas. We put in forces to block them, we brought in assets such as attack helicopters, we had A-10s and F-16s in support and ISR assets, UAVs above. And each one had very specific detailed areas for engagement.

We set up our engagement area, we forced them to that location, and then we fought them in the city also. Those who tried to leave went right into where we expected them too, and they were engaged. Those that stayed in the village, they maneuvered on us, and they found -- obviously, when you get that direct-fire fight, the American soldier is going to win every time. We suffered no American casualties.

Q How far near -- how near Baqubah was this engagement? Was it near Baqubah?

COL. POPPAS: It's probably -- it's almost 20 kilometers away. It's a separate area.

Q North, southeast, west?

COL. POPPAS: It is -- yeah, if you look at Baqubah, it's to the north.

Q Okay.

COL. POPPAS: If you have a map, see the Diyala River Valley. Travel to the north and it is up to the north-northwest from Baqubah.

Q How did your troops do?

COL. POPPAS: I tell you, it was -- they were impressive. Again, this is a pretty cohesive unit, a very cohesive unit. And we have the fortunate benefit of when we transition from battalion to the squadron -- we put this team together and we handpicked these guys and we trained and trained so we've been together for over two years now. And you can see the difference just like any team, whether it's in professional sports or here in the military. You get to know each other.

And every free minute over here, you know, if you're not in the fight, you are training; you're rehearsing. And you can see that the way that we execute our battle drills and our collective tasks, from the individual soldier to the leadership, it is very refined; it's very professional, and they just flow. It maintains that momentum that you expect. And you deny the enemy the ability to react to you, because you're on top of them, laying a base of fire and maneuvering. And these guys did phenomenal.

Q And this engagement was the July 12th, you said. That was part of Operation Ithaca.

COL. POPPAS: Right, right, that was Operation Ithaca.

Q Because I had information -- yeah, I had Ithaca started the 5th of July I have. But you were saying this is part of it, right?

COL. POPPAS: Operation Ithaca itself was on the 12th of July.

Q Oh, okay, good.

COL. POPPAS: But we've had other operations -- yeah, we've been fighting in the Diyala River Valley since the beginning of March.

Q That's good, yeah.

COL. POPPAS: We fought in As Sadiyah, Baqubah, Zaganiyah (sp), where we still maintain a presence, and on this -- and on the western side of the river. And we have had a series of operations on the western side also, as we expected. As you continue to fight the east side in Baqubah, they're going to go somewhere. So we continue to set

the conditions, laying a trap for the enemy to come to these locations. Once they come there, we finalize the plan and we engage them.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thanks, Gerry.

Anyone else? Did anybody else get a chance to join us online? I know we were having technical difficulties there.

Q Yeah, this is Charlie Quidnunc at the Whizbang Podcast.

MR. HOLT: Hey, Charlie.

Q Hi, Jack.

MR. HOLT: Yeah, go ahead.

Q My question is, Jack, you sent out some pictures along with us. I wonder if the colonel would be willing to talk about the pictures that were sent out.

There was a -- what looked like men on a road, and then some stuff on a bed -- passports and handcuffs, money.

MR. HOLT: Yes. Those were the photos that were sent to us from the CPIC. I believe they were part of the news release that went out, sir.

COL. POPPAS: If there are pictures of money, and with that there should have been -- I'm not sure if they released the eight individuals -- a picture of the eight hostages that were released. But that came from the room in the house in which they were being held. They went through a sensitive site exploitation, we call it, and you go through every house, you look for caches that are there, and that was part of it. With that, what you saw there, we also found video cameras and video tapes that the al Qaeda have filmed both those individuals and then also others that had previously been filmed, had been found guilty by their own judicial system, which is just another al Qaeda member deeming them guilty, and then other parts of that film showed others being executed. This group of eight had already been found guilty and they were to be executed that day of our assault.

Q And would you say that these are al Qaeda, Sunni extremists, or Shi'a?

COL. POPPAS: The group of -- this element that was in the village were Sunnis and they were an al Qaeda element.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. POPPAS: And we found also with that the regular propaganda that will lead you to that, then also the 23 detainees, that is also the picture that is being painted through the questioning that they are going through at this time.

Q And there's one other picture of a gentleman with just his shirt showing -- I mean shirt off and his back showing.

COL. POPPAS: His back is completely -- I mean it's black and blue. There's abrasions and there's open cuts on it. That was one of the men of the eight hostages that was kept, and he was freed. His chest also had some pretty large contusions on it. And he -- I mean he admittedly said he was beaten. I'll tell you, one of the things that we found, they had a metal pole, and on it it's almost a cat-of-nine-tails, but instead of leather it had pieces of chain hanging from it. And he was beaten with that pipe and chain.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Anyone else online? (Pause.) Okay, any follow-up questions? (Pause.)

Well, sir, I think -- I know we're about out of time here. And I appreciate your patience with us as we worked through the technical difficulties. Glad to have you with us today, sir, and hopefully we can do this again.

Do you have a closing statement for us?

COL. POPPAS: No, just one of thanks to you. And I look forward to doing it, especially with the military bloggers because a lot of times that is -- it is focused, it's people who understand the military fight, and they get the story of the soldier that's over here fighting.

As I said before, the soldiers have a great attitude. They are very positive. When you see operations such as this, one so successful, and you free eight individuals, you destroy this entity that had been extorting the local populace, and now we work the repatriation, it is very positive. That's not often carried in the stories of your national news. But we find that most through the blogs, that I will tell you my soldiers routinely go to.

Q Hey, Jack, can I -- Colonel, have you got time for one more quick question on that note?

MR. HOLT: Sure.

Q Good. Colonel, Andrew Lubin at ON Point. Following that thought, we have the concept of clear, hold and build. How are we doing on building now, now that

you've done -- the guys have done such a great job there? What's next? Is civil affairs coming in? Or what's the next step there?

COL. POPPAS: Oh, definitely. Obviously we discussed the kinetic portion of this. On all of our operations, there is a non-kinetic portion that comes in. I have C-18s assigned to me. The amount of planning we put into the kinetic op, we put just as much to the non-kinetic because we understand just going in and, you know, you can eradicate the enemy, but if you don't build on the back side and really empower the local populace, repatriate them, give them what they require in terms of anything from infrastructure, basic service, security and safety, you will not have long-term success.

Q Right, can you -- sorry --

COL. POPPAS: I have found, and I can speak specifically to the (DRV ?), we have found great success --

Q Can you tell us what you're doing there? Okay.

COL. POPPAS: I'm sorry, say again?

Q Yeah. Can you tell us what you're doing there? I mean how bad is the infrastructure? What did you inherit when you rolled in?

COL. POPPAS: The infrastructure itself --

Q I mean are you rebuilding sewers, schools? What are they actually doing?

COL. POPPAS: We have done that. Now, in this instance, just being four days out, what we are looking at is they had forced out the entire population of all three of these villages and they have moved to a northern village. We have engaged with them; we are setting the security infrastructure in place to bring them back. Obviously, families there, in and of themselves, provide security because it's early reporting and denies the freedom of movement. Additionally what we have done is we've brought in food sorts, you bring in blankets, you bring in things that maintain the family. And you do that also under an umbrella of safety and security.

On the east side, where we've been for a few months now, in places like Asada (ph) and Vaghaniya (ph) what we have brought is a system to bring food in; the central government distributes the food. We have restored electricity. We have brought jobs to the area because now you can have smaller businesses open also, the local markets. Infrastructure-wise what we have done is we've helped to rebuild, with the locals building it, we've got the school, a medical center; and then some of the local areas where the mukhtars identified, roads where we fill in all the potholes, take down walls that have impeded movement of the people -- these are the type of infrastructure projects. The basic services are obviously there, and then the safety and security.

I'll tell you, one of the critical pieces for the long-term hold, it's the development of -- we call them security working groups, because it provides a very peaceful form for the mukhtars, the sheikhs, obviously the local leadership, plus the politically elected leadership of the region and even the governor of Diyala, in conjunction with Iraqi security forces, IA and IP, to come together. And these are Shi'a and Sunni together, of the leaders, and discuss in this peaceful forum issues that they have and not resort to violence in order to settle their disputes.

Q Excellent. Thank you. Appreciate this.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, sir.

COL. POPPAS: Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Colonel -- Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Poppas --

COL. POPPAS: Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: -- commander Task Force 300. And appreciate you being with us today, and thanks for all the good work.

COL. POPPAS: Hoo-ah. Airborne. Thank you.

Q Thank you, sir.

Q Thank you, sir.

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